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# Axiomatic heresy

## The non-philosophy of François Laruelle

**Ray Brassier**

There are at least two ways of evaluating philosophical originality. The most obvious is in terms of *what* a philosopher thinks. As well as proposing novel philosophical theses concerning the nature of being or truth or knowledge, a philosopher may produce new sorts of claim bearing on history, art, morality, politics, and so on. Another way of evaluating originality is in terms of *how* a philosopher thinks. There are philosophers whose most conspicuous claim to innovation resides not so much in what they think but rather in how they think. They propose a fundamental change in the way philosophy is done – a revolutionary break, a new beginning. Descartes, Kant, Hegel and Husserl are perhaps the most celebrated examples, but figures such as Frege or Russell also deserve a mention. That their putative innovation may, on closer inspection, turn out to be pseudo-revolutionary or essentially conservative is irrelevant here. What is relevant is their avowed ambition to effect a total transformation in philosophical method, to have reconfigured both the formal means and the substantive aims of philosophizing. Thus, the novelty of *what* they think is less important than the newness of *how* they think. Which is to say that any substantive claims philosophers like this make about history or nature or art or politics can only be appraised in light of the revolutionary innovation they purport to have brought about at the level of the form of philosophical thinking.

It will be objected that this is an entirely superficial distinction and that the canonical philosophers in the European tradition combine both dimensions of originality in varying proportions: their work marries a greater or lesser degree of formal inventiveness to a greater or lesser degree of substantive innovation. And of course Hegelians or Deleuzeans will be quick to point out that in Hegel or Deleuze we have formal invention and substantive innovation bound together in perfect equipoise. Heideggerians or Derrideans will be equally quick to point out that Heidegger or Derrida wed formidable abstract inventiveness to

detailed concrete analyses in a way that cannot be mapped back onto this clumsy form/content schema. Notwithstanding this clumsiness, however, and the ease with which exceptions and counter-examples can be summoned, this admittedly simplistic schema remains useful if only because it provides us with a basic frame in terms of which to begin gauging the originality of a thinker who has a serious claim to being the most important unknown philosopher working in Europe today: François Laruelle.<sup>1</sup>

What makes Laruelle so singular is that he may well be the first European philosopher in whose work substantive innovation has been wholeheartedly sacrificed in the name of total formal invention. This is a polite way of saying that, unlike his more illustrious peers,<sup>2</sup> not only does Laruelle not make novel philosophical claims about being or truth or knowledge; he also has nothing much to say about history, ethics, art or politics – or at least nothing that would make any kind of sense outside the parameters of his own severely abstract theoretical apparatus. Those deliciously ‘substantial’ titbits with which it is customary for the philosopher to placate the public’s appetite for ‘concretion’ are entirely lacking in his work. ‘Show me an example of an example, and I renounce this book’, Laruelle once quipped.<sup>3</sup>

The truth is that his thought operates at a level of abstraction which some will find debilitating, others exhilarating. Those who believe formal invention should be subordinated to substantive innovation will undoubtedly find Laruelle’s work rebarbative. Those who believe that untethering formal invention from the constraints of substantive innovation – and thereby transforming the latter – remains a philosophically worthy challenge, may well find Laruelle’s work invigorating. Regardless of the response – whether it be one of repulsion or fascination – Laruelle remains indifferent. Abstraction is a price he is more than willing to pay in exchange for a methodological innovation which promises to enlarge the possibilities of conceptual

invention far beyond the resources of philosophical novelty.

Thus, Laruelle's importance can be encapsulated in a single claim: the claim to have discovered *a new way of thinking*. By 'new', of course, Laruelle means 'philosophically unprecedented'. But what Laruelle means by 'philosophically unprecedented' is not what philosophical revolutionaries like Descartes, Kant, Hegel or Husserl meant by it. Laruelle prefers heresy to revolution. Where philosophical revolution involves a reformation of philosophy for the ultimate benefit of philosophy itself – and a philosophical stake in what philosophy *should* be doing – heresy involves a *use* of philosophy in the absence of any philosophically vested interest in providing a normative definition of philosophy. This is not to say that Laruelle's heretical use of philosophy is anchored in a refusal to define philosophy; were that the case, there would be nothing to distinguish it from cynical Rortian pragmatism. On the contrary, what makes the Laruellean heresy interesting is the way it provides a philosophically disinterested – which is to say non-normative – definition of the essence of philosophy.

Like the revolutionary, the heretic refuses to accept any definition of philosophy rooted in an appeal to the authority of philosophical tradition. But unlike the revolutionary, who more often than not overturns tradition in order to reactivate philosophy's supposedly originary but occluded essence, the heretic proceeds on the basis of an indifference which *suspends* tradition and establishes a philosophically disinterested definition of philosophy's essence, or, as Laruelle prefers to say, identity. This disinterested identification of philosophy results in what Laruelle calls a non-philosophical use of philosophy: a use of philosophy that remains constitutively foreign to the norms and aims governing the properly philosophical practice of philosophy. And in fact, 'non-philosophy' is Laruelle's name for the philosophically unprecedented or heretical practice of philosophy he has invented.

Yet despite its name, this is neither an 'anti-philosophy' nor yet another variant on the well-worn 'end of philosophy' theme. It is not the latest variety of deconstruction or one more manifestation of post-philosophical pragmatism. *Non-philosophy is a theoretical practice of philosophy proceeding by way of transcendental axioms and producing theorems which are philosophically uninterpretable*. 'Uninterpretable' because Laruelle insists – and reactions to his work certainly seem to bear him out – non-philosophy is constitutively unintelligible to philosophers, in the same way that non-Euclidian geometries are constitutively

unintelligible to Euclidian geometers.<sup>4</sup> Thus, Laruelle suggests that the 'non' in the expression 'non-philosophy' be understood as akin to the 'non' in the expression 'non-Euclidian' geometry: not as a negation or denial of philosophy, but as suspending a specific structure (the philosophical equivalent of Euclid's fifth axiom concerning parallels) which Laruelle sees as constitutive of the traditional practice of philosophy. New possibilities of thought become available once that structure has been suspended and non-philosophy is an index of those philosophically unenvisageable possibilities.

Consequently, if non-philosophy can be contrasted to the postmodern pragmatist's 'supermarket trolley' approach to philosophy, where the philosophical consumer's personal predilections provide the sole criterion for choosing between competing philosophies, and where the academy now figures as a sort of intellectual superstore, it is not as yet another theoretical novelty – the latest fad, the next big thing – but as *a means of turning the practice of philosophy itself into an exercise in perpetual invention*.

How is such a practice possible? Why should it be necessary? And what worth does this enlargement of possibility for thought have? These are the questions we propose to examine in what follows.

## Philosophy as decision

We must begin by considering the first of several of Laruelle's controversial claims: that there is a single, transhistorical invariant operative in every attempt to philosophize, whether it be by Hume or Heidegger, Descartes or Derrida. Laruelle calls this invariant 'the philosophical decision'. The structure of decision is a formal syntax governing the possibilities of philosophizing. Yet it remains unrecognized by philosophers themselves; not through a lack of reflexive scrupulousness on their part *but precisely because of it*. It is philosophy's hyper-reflexivity that prevents it from identifying its own decisional form. Decision cannot be grasped reflexively because it is the constitutively reflexive element of philosophizing. The identification of decision as essence of philosophizing presupposes a non-reflexive or (in Laruellese) *non-thetic* perspective on the thetic reflexivity which is the very element of philosophy.

This is why non-philosophy is not metaphilosophical – philosophy is already metaphilosophical through its constitutive reflexivity or specularity: every philosophy worthy of the name harbours (whether implicitly or explicitly) a philosophy of philosophy. Non-philosophy is not a philosophy of philosophy but a heterogeneous

practice of philosophy; one shorn of the dimension of specular reflexivity which is intrinsic to decision. And once again, since philosophical specularity is a function of the structure of decision, the identification of the decisional structure which conditions that specularity is only possible from a non-specular, which is to say non-decisional, perspective on philosophy. But in order to understand how this non-philosophical perspective is not only possible but already operative for the non-philosopher, we have to understand how decision operates.

Decision minimally consists in an act of scission or separation dividing two terms: a conditioned (but not necessarily perceptual or empirical) datum and its condition as an *a priori* (but not necessarily rational) faktum, both of which are *posited as given* in and through a synthetic unity wherein condition and conditioned, datum and faktum, are conjoined. Thus the philosopher posits a structure of articulation which immediately binds and distinguishes the conditioned datum – that which is given – whether it be perceptual, phenomenological, linguistic, social or historical, and its condition – its givenness – as an *a priori* faktum through which that datum is given: for example, sensibility, subjectivity, language, society, history.

What is crucial here is the way in which such a structure is immediately independent of, yet inseparable from, the two terms which it simultaneously connects and differentiates. It is a basically fractional structure comprising two differentiated terms and their difference as a third term that is simultaneously intrinsic and extrinsic, immanent and transcendent to those two terms. Thus, for any philosophical distinction or dyad, such as transcendental/empirical, subject/substance, being/beings, *différance*/presence, the distinction is simultaneously intrinsic and immanent to the distinguished terms *and* extrinsic and transcendent in so far as it is supposed to remain constitutive of the difference between the terms themselves. For the division is inseparable from a moment of immanent indivision guaranteeing the unity-in-differentiation of the dyadic coupling.

The result is a structure wherein the coupling of related terms is also their *disjoining* – for example: pure synthesis as that which (dis)joins transcendental and empirical (Kant); self-relating negativity as that which (dis)joins subject and substance (Hegel); horizontal ekstasis as that which (dis)joins being and beings (Heidegger); *différance* as that which (dis)joins architect and signified presence (Derrida); ‘indifferentiation’ as that which (dis)joins virtual and actual

(Deleuze) – a (dis)joining that remains co-constituted by the two terms it is supposed to condition and so implicitly contained within both. Because it is posited as given in and through the immediate distinction between conditioned datum and conditioning faktum – the very distinction which it is supposed to constitute – this structure presupposes itself as given in and through the datum which it constitutes, and posits itself as *a priori* condition, or givenness, in and through the faktum which conditions that datum.

Thus, because the disjoining of condition and conditioned is simultaneously extrinsic and intrinsic to their joining, all the moments of a philosophical decision are self-positing (or auto-positional) and self-presupposing (or auto-donational): a conditioned datum is given by being posited *a priori* through some conditioning faktum which is in turn only articulated as conditioning in so far as it has already been presupposed through that datum, and so on. There is a sense in which the structure of decision is circular in that it already presupposes itself in whatever phenomenon or set of phenomena it articulates. Hence the suspicion that philosophy manages to interpret everything while explaining nothing, because the structure of the *explanans*, decision, is already presupposed in the *explanandum*, the phenomenon or phenomena to be explained. Yet strictly speaking the structure of decision is not so much that of a circle as that of a Möbius strip – but one where the twist that joins the inner and outer faces of the strip and allows them to flow smoothly into one another is also a fracture, scission or split whose dimensionality is simultaneously more and less than, both in excess of and subtracted from, the immanent dimensions of the strip’s opposing surfaces.

This fractional loop, this auto-positional and auto-donational structure, constitutes philosophy’s inherently reflexive or specular character. It guarantees that everything is potentially philosophizable, which is to say, possible grist for the decisional mill. Thus, if philosophizing (especially in the ‘continental’ manner) remains a loose-knit grouping of interpretative strategies rather than a rigorous theoretical praxis, it is because decisional specularity ensures the world remains philosophy’s mirror. Philosophizing the world becomes a pretext for philosophy’s own interminable self-interpretation. And since interpretation is a function of talent rather than rigour, the plurality of mutually incompatible yet unfalsifiable interpretations merely perpetuates the uncircumscribable ubiquity of philosophy’s auto-encompassing specularity. Absolute specularity breeds infinite

interpretation – such is the norm for the philosophical practice of thought.

### Unilateral duality

Moreover, if everything is philosophizable, that which most urgently needs to be philosophized for post-Kantian European philosophy is the difference between philosophy and its other(s); which is to say, the difference between the philosophical and the extra-philosophical. Continental philosophy lives off this difference between itself and its specular, imaginary other(s): science, religion, the mystical, the ethical, the political, the aesthetic or even – surely a symptom of terminal desperation – ‘the ordinary’. It is because philosophy enjoys a constitutive relation to the extra-philosophical, however characterized, that the ‘non’ in Laruelle’s ‘non-philosophy’ indexes a suspension of philosophy’s all-encompassing specularity, rather than a naive attempt to demarcate or delimit it – which would merely reiterate the decisional gesture.

Thus, whereas the relation between the philosophical and the extra-philosophical is constitutively dialectical (where ‘dialectical’ is taken to mean ‘differential’ in the broadest possible sense), and since the dialectical relationality championed by philosophy is invariably one of bilateral reciprocity (following the circular logic of decision), the relation between philosophy and non-philosophy is one of what Laruelle calls ‘unilateral duality’ – ‘unilateral duality’ rather than just ‘unilaterality’. This is a crucial technical nuance. The concept of ‘unilateral duality’ lies at the very heart of Laruelle’s non-philosophical enterprise and it is important to distinguish it from the notion of unilateral relation, which is well known in philosophy: *X* distinguishes itself unilaterally from *Y* without *Y* distinguishing itself from *X* in return. Various Neo-Platonists, Hegel, Heidegger, Derrida and Deleuze all make (implicit) use of this logic of unilaterality in different ways. But in philosophy, the unilaterality of *X* is always reinscribed in a bilateral relation with *Y* at the supplementary meta-level available to the subject of philosophy, who enjoys a position of overview vis-à-vis *X* and *Y* and continues to see both terms in relation to one another at the same time. Thus, *X*’s unilaterality relative to *Y* is only operative at the level of *X* and *Y*, not for the philosopher who exempts himself from this immanent relation through transcendence. The philosopher is always a spectator who views everything (terms and relations) from above. This is what Laruelle means by specularity.

By way of contrast, in the non-philosophical logic of unilateral duality, it is the subject of non-philosophy

(what Laruelle calls ‘the Stranger-subject’) who now effectuates the *unilateralizing* identity of the term *Y* while philosophy instantiates the *unilateralized* difference of the term *X* as it distinguishes itself from *Y*. Consequently, it is not non-philosophy that distinguishes itself unilaterally from philosophy but philosophy that distinguishes itself unilaterally from non-philosophy. But in non-philosophical thought, the supplementary dimension of specular reflexivity through which the philosopher is able to oversee the relation between *X* and *Y* is effectively reduced, rendered inoperative, so that the unilateral relation between *X* and *Y* has itself become unilateralized, deprived of its transcendent, bilateral circumscription via the subject of philosophy and leaving only the unilateralizing identity of *Y* qua subject of non-philosophy and the unilateralized difference between *X* and *Y* qua philosophy. *Y, the subject of non-philosophy, is now radically indifferent to the difference between X and Y, philosophy and non-philosophy.*

This total structure is what Laruelle means by unilateral duality: a structure comprising non-relation (the subject of non-philosophy as unilateralizing identity) and the relation of relation and non-relation (philosophy as unilateralized difference between *X* and *Y*). Unlike philosophical unilaterality, which always ultimately has two sides, the unilateral duality which lies at the heart of non-philosophy is a duality with only one side: the side of philosophy as difference (relation) between *X* (relation) and *Y* (non-relation). Accordingly, if the apex of decision’s dialectical specularity consists in articulating the relation between the philosophical and extra-philosophical as ‘relation of relation and non-relation’, then the unilateral duality as non-dialectical ‘relation’ between philosophy and non-philosophy has to be understood in terms of ‘the non-relation of relation and non-relation’. Once again, unlike the philosophical dialectic, non-philosophy effectuates a unilateral duality with only one side – the side of philosophy as all-encompassing relationality. Since every philosophical decision is always two-sided – that is, dialectical – the non-philosophical unilateralization of decision cannot be dialectically reinscribed.

### The axiomatic suspension of decision

What is innovative about twentieth-century European philosophy’s preoccupation with alterity or difference,<sup>5</sup> Laruelle suggests, is its attempt to use the latter as a way of acknowledging and mobilizing the structural blind spot in decision, the moment of absolute division as absolute indivision, the fractional surplus



or indivisible remainder that (dis)joins decision and enables philosophical reflexivity while disabling philosophy's attempt to grasp the non-specular root of its own specularity. If twentieth-century European philosophy has consistently characterized that condition as an aporia, caesura or unobjectifiable excess (e.g. *différance*, non-identity, *Unterschied*, event, other, real, and so on), it is because it has tried to grasp the non-reflexive root of reflexivity using reflexive means. Hence the latter's aporetic or intra-decisional characterization as condition of (im)possibility for philosophy; as an unnameable traumatic kernel that resists or shatters conceptualization.

For Laruelle, philosophy's assumption that decisional reflexivity is the only available paradigm for abstract thought, and that specular abstraction is the only possible kind of abstraction, results in this aporetic characterization of the non-thetic root of decision. Yet a non-specular paradigm of theoretical abstraction already exists, Laruelle insists. Moreover, it exists precisely in that form of thinking which 'continental' philosophy has consistently belittled and demeaned as un-thinking: the axiomatic. Since philosophy cannot conceive of a thought operating without recourse to the fractured mirror of decision, since it equates thinking with infinite specularity and interminable interpretation, it cannot imagine any thought worthy of the name that would be neither specular nor interpretative. Yet axiomatic abstraction provides the paradigm for precisely such a thought: one which is non-specular, non-reflexive. This non-thetic or immanently performative thought anchors itself in the non-reflexive root of decision by positing it axiomatically as its own enabling condition, rather than trying to grasp it decisionally and failing (it is this failure which results in the aporetic characterization of decision's non-thetic root as unthinkable caesura or obstacle to conceptualization). What is an obstacle for decisional conceptualization – an obstacle whose quasi-insurmountable status fuels the postmodern pathos of terminal exhaustion – provides a new basis for axiomatic invention. It is a question of positing the non-thetic root of decision axiomatically, without presupposing it via decision. Or (which comes to the same thing) of presupposing it via an axiom rather than positing it via a decision.

For Laruelle, a thinking of this sort – axiomatic or non-philosophical thinking – is not merely possible but real, which is to say radically performative (we will have more to say about this performativity below). Thus, if the 'non' in non-philosophy is not a negation of philosophical reflexivity it is because it indexes a

thinking for which philosophical decision qua infinite reflexivity encompassing and integrating its own limits *has already been suspended through an act of axiomatic positing*. But what prevents this axiomatic suspension of decisional specularity from amounting to yet another decisional scission between the philosophical and the extra-philosophical is the fact that it is effected on the basis of an immanence which has not itself been decided about: an immanence which has not been posited and presupposed as given through a transcendent act of decision, but axiomatically posited as already given, independently of every perceptual or intentional presupposition, as well as every gesture of ontological or phenomenological position. It is posited as already given and as *already determining its own positing*.

Thus, this non-decisional immanence, which allows itself to be posited as already given without decisional positing, is an immanence that does not even need to be liberated from decisional transcendence: it is precisely as that which is already separated (without-separation) from the decisional co-constitution of given and givenness, immanence and transcendence, that it conditions its own positing as already given. Consequently, this non-decisional immanence is not the Deleuzian plane of immanence, which is at once presupposed as pre-philosophically given and constructed or posited as given through the philosophical concept,<sup>6</sup> in accordance with the decisional co-constitution of given and givenness, positing and presupposition. Where decision renders positing and presupposition co-constitutive – the positing of a presupposition and the presupposition of the posited (as in Hegel's exemplary analysis of the logic of reflection in the *Science of Logic*) – the non-decisional axiom separates them in such a way as to render the immanence it has posited *determining* for its own description as already posited (without-presupposition). By the same token, the axiom renders the immanence it has presupposed *determining* for its own description as already presupposed (without-positing).

Consequently, unlike Michel Henry's phenomenologized version of radical immanence,<sup>7</sup> which has to absolve itself from reflexive specularity in order to count as non-thetic, Laruelle's non-decisional immanence is not co-constituted by decision. Non-philosophical immanence is *foreclosed* rather than opposed to decision – which is to say: radically indifferent to the dyadic distinction between positing and presupposing, immanence and transcendence, given and givenness, as well as to every other decisional dyad. In other words, it is radically indifferent to all dyadic couplings of the

form: thinkable/unthinkable, decidable/undecidable, determinable/undeterminable.

It should now be easier to see why a certain obvious philosophical objection to the non-philosophical positing of radical immanence misses the point. This objection, which tries to argue that the axiomatic positing of immanence as non-decisional reinscribes it in the dyad decision/non-decision, thereby allowing it to become co-constituted by decision, is mistaken on three counts.

First, whereas philosophical specularity operates by assuming a fundamental reciprocity or reversibility between conceptual description and ontological constitution, non-specular or non-philosophical thinking does not. It operates on the basis of a radically irreversible or unilateral duality between the axiomatic positing of immanence and its description as already posited. Thus, the non-philosophical characterization of radical immanence as already given does not constitute it as given. Radical immanence is ontologically foreclosed. It remains non-constitutable, not because it opposes or resists constitution, but because it is indifferent to the dyadic distinction between description and constitution. It is the *already constituted* determining its own description as constituted. Thus, there is no dyadic distinction between the axiomatic positing of immanence as given and its description as posited. Instead, there is a unilateral duality, which is to say a duality with only one side: that of the description which is determined by the positing without determining that positing in return. This unilateral or non-decisional duality, whereby what is axiomatically given determines its own description as given, guarantees that the non-philosophical description of radical immanence as already posited is adequate to it in the last instance, without being constitutive of it. *Adequation without correspondence*: such is the hallmark of truth for a non-philosophical axiomatic shorn of the specularity that envelops truth as correspondence, coherence or unveiling (*aletheia*).

Second, that radical immanence is foreclosed to constitution does not mean that it is unconceptualizable. On the contrary, it becomes limitlessly conceptualizable on the basis of any given conceptual material precisely in so far as it already determines its own description as adequate to it in the last instance, without any of these conceptual characterizations or descriptions becoming co-constitutive or co-determining for it. Thus, where decisional thinking posits and presupposes a reversible equivalence between immanence and its transcendent conceptual characterization,

non-decisional thinking operates on the basis of an irreversible duality between them, so that immanence unilaterally determines its own transcendent conceptual description, without being determined by it in return.

Third, the separation between the decisional and non-decisional is not itself dyadic, which is to say decisional. To maintain that is to fail to acknowledge that for non-philosophy that separation is axiomatically posited as *already* in effect without recourse to decision, in accordance with the nature of radical immanence as *separate-without-separation* and determining its own description as already-separate. Accordingly, it is imperative that we appreciate the peculiar radicality of the manner in which Laruelle's 'non' separates the decisional from the non-decisional. It is not two distinct 'things' that are being separated. If it were, the non-philosopher would indeed still be operating within the ambit of decision. What this 'non' separates is the realm of separability in its entirety (decision) from the inseparable (immanence) as that which is posited as already separated prior to the need for a separating decision. In other words, the non-philosophical positing of immanence as already given axiomatically separates decisional separation (scission, distinction, differentiation, division, dialectic) from the inseparable as that which is already separated, independently of any separating decision.

Of course, it is intrinsic to the character of decisional thinking that it cannot acknowledge this axiomatic separation between the decisional and the non-decisional as something which is already realized, already achieved for non-philosophy. Decisional specularity cannot countenance the axiomatic positing of a radically autonomous, non-specular immanence. However, for Laruelle, far from indicating confusion on the part of philosophers, this incapacity is symptomatic of philosophy's necessary *resistance* to non-philosophy. Far from being an unfortunate, arbitrary expression of philosophical prejudice, this resistance is wholly and legitimately necessary. It is structurally intrinsic to decision rather than empirically contingent. In other words, it is *de jure* rather than *de facto*. Decisional thinking is programmed to insist that the axiomatic positing of immanence amounts to yet another instance of decisional division. It is obliged to reduce the axiomatic suspension of decision according to immanence to an intra-decisional opposition to decision, or an anti-decisional annihilation of decision. And rather than being a problem or obstacle for non-philosophy, this philosophical resistance is precisely what non-philosophy requires in order to operate. The decisional

resistance to radical immanence provides non-philosophy with the occasional cause which it needs in order to begin working. It is what initiates non-philosophical thinking in the first place. There would be no non-philosophy without it. Non-philosophy is the conversion of philosophy's specular resistance to non-thetic immanence into a form of non-specular thinking determined according to that immanence.

### Determination in the last instance

Thus, non-philosophy works with philosophical decision. It does not seek to replace or supplant it. Philosophical decision is the object of non-philosophy – better still, its material. But it is a matter of using decision non-philosophically. Consequently, besides positing immanence as ultimately determining instance for non-decisional thought, the non-philosophical axiom posits decisional resistance to that positing as something which is also already given non-decisionally as a determinable material; a contingent occasion that can be determined in accordance with immanence's foreclosure to decision. Following an axiomatically given immanence as *determining* instance, the second axiomatically given factor for non-philosophy is decisional resistance to immanence as *determinable* occasion.

Accordingly, non-philosophy is the coordination of 'two' causes: immanence as necessary cause in-the-last-instance and decisional resistance as occasional cause. Non-philosophy is simply the determination of the latter by the former: it is the taking into consideration of decisional resistance to immanence as an occasional material to be determined in accordance with immanence as cause in-the-last-instance. Thus, the minimal but definitive coordinates for the non-philosophical axiomatic are: immanence qua radically necessary condition; decisional resistance qua occasional cause; and immanence's determination of decision as transcendental effectuation of that necessary determining condition *for* that determinable material.

We are now in a position to understand in what sense the new way of thinking initiated by Laruelle is supposed to be philosophically unprecedented. The syntax of non-philosophical thought is that of determination-in-the-last-instance as unilateral duality whereby the non-philosophical subject determines philosophical decision. Like much in Laruelle, 'determination in the last instance' is an expression with an explicit philosophical lineage – in this case, Althusserian. But like every other philosophical expression used by Laruelle, it has been subjected to non-philosophical transforma-

tion. In Althusser, the philosophical dyad infrastructure/superstructure entails that the last instance remains reciprocally co-constituted by what it determines, in accordance with the bilateral logic of decision. For Laruelle, however, the last instance is separate-without-separation from the decisional logic which it unilaterally determines. Determination-in-the-last-instance consists in the non-philosophical transformation of the unitary syntax of decision qua transcendental synthesis or 'One-of-the-dyad' into a unilateral duality whereby the One (i.e. identity or immanence) now unilateralizes the philosophical dyad (i.e. difference or transcendence) – not directly, since it is indifferent to decision, but through the intermediary of the non-philosophical subject who has posited immanence as determining and decision as determinable. The structure of the non-philosophical subject is simply that of the unilateral duality: a duality with only one side – that of decision as transcendent difference between the decisional and the non-decisional. The 'other', non-side of this duality is not immanence, whose radical indifference precludes any direct determination of philosophy on its part, but the non-philosophical subject itself as unilateralizing instance effectuating immanence's indifference. Since philosophical resistance to non-philosophy *occasions* non-philosophy, the non-philosophical subject effectively unilateralizes (or 'dualyses') its own dyadic inscription at the hands of philosophical resistance. Non-philosophical thinking consists in converting philosophy's bilateral resistance to non-philosophy into a unilateral duality: not the unilateral duality of immanence and decision, which does not exist since the former is radically indifferent to decision, but rather the unilateral duality effectuated by the subject of non-philosophy in so far as it is now the organon for determining decisional resistance according to immanence.

Obviously, the role played by this non-philosophical subject bears little resemblance to that played by the philosophical subject. It is no longer the phenomenological subject, whether the latter be construed in terms of intentional consciousness or being-in-the-world. But nor is it the subject as caesura, self-relating negativity. It is neither the explicitly reflexive, self-conscious subject, nor the pre-reflexive, unconscious subject, who is merely the obverse of the latter and therefore implicitly enveloped by decisional reflexivity. It is simply a *function*: the transcendental function which non-philosophy effectuates for philosophy on the basis of immanence as real invariant and decision as occasional variable. The subject as transcendental function is a radically disembodied, excarnate, non-conscious



subject performing a set of quasi-algorithmic operations upon a philosophical material by determining-it-in-the-last-instance. These operations involve neither interpretation nor reflection: they are blind, automatic, mechanical, which is to say non-thetic. Consequently, the non-philosophical subject is simply an axiomatizing organon, a transcendental computer, but one which Laruelle prefers to characterize as a 'uni-maton' rather than as an auto-maton.<sup>8</sup> This is a subject which has been definitively purged of all its philosophical privileges as locus of reflection and reduced to the unilateralizing structure of determination-in-the-last-instance. Thus, for non-philosophy unilateralization *is* subjectivation and subjectivation *is* determination: the non-philosophical subject determines decision by converting the philosophical dyad which provides its material support into a theorem that is – at least temporarily – philosophically uninterpretable because it cannot be dyadically circumscribed or 'decided'. However, unlike deconstruction, where aporia or undecidability is unleashed merely in order to effect a destabilization of metaphysical conceptuality, the non-philosophical subject's unilateralization of decision has a positive and expansive rather than negative and delimiting effect on philosophy: a non-philosophical theorem ultimately forces philosophy to expand its available decisional resources by obliging it to invent a new dyad in order to decide – reintegrate – the unilateral duality encapsulated in that theorem.

### The non-philosophical identity of theory and practice

Determination or unilateralization is not just what the subject of non-philosophy does, it is what he/she *is*. Performativity is the hallmark of thinking *in accordance with* immanence. It provides the criterion for an important contrast between the self-sufficient or philosophical practice of philosophy and its non-philosophical practice. Philosophy's specular self-sufficiency means that the philosophical practice of philosophy is not really a theoretical practice but rather an empirical activity whose claim to theoretical legitimacy is only ever assured through its performance. Thus, philosophy is a game, the rules of which are always effectively guaranteed by virtue of the operation through which their stipulation is enacted. Moreover, the philosopher reinscribes his/her own philosophical activity within the decisional mirroring which renders that activity co-constitutive of the real at a level that is simultaneously ontic-empirical and ontological-transcendental (the decisional hybrid once

again). More exactly, the syntax of decision enacts or performs its own hallucinatory reality in what effectively amounts to an operation of auto-deduction with a tripartite structure: decision is at once an empirically conditioned enunciation; an enunciated faktum conditioning that enunciation; and finally the transcendental synthesis of enunciated condition and condition of enunciation as event of thought. This is the complex internal architecture proper to the decisional '*autos*' as self-positing/self-donating circle or doublet.<sup>9</sup>

For Laruelle, the trouble with this performative dimension of philosophical activity, this decisional auto-enactment, lies not in its performativity (far from it) but in the way in which the latter invariably operates on the basis of an unstated set of constative assumptions which themselves only ever become performatively legitimated. In other words, philosophy consists in the co-constitution of theory and practice: it is a theory whose cognitive possibilities are compromised through an extraneous set of practical exigencies, and a practice whose performative capacities are hindered by a needlessly restrictive system of theoretical assumptions.<sup>10</sup> The philosopher, in effect, never says what he/she is really doing, nor does what he/she is really saying.

Laruelle objects to this co-constitution of theory and practice, constative and performative, on the grounds that it needlessly constricts both the possibilities of saying and of doing, of theory and of practice. Moreover, simply to affirm the *différance* between theory and practice, constative and performative, is complacently to reaffirm philosophical decision's embroilment in its own self-presupposing, self-perpetuating structure.

By positing radical immanence as *already-performed*, as performed-without-performance, the non-philosophical subject operationalizes the non-decisional essence of performativity.<sup>11</sup> It releases the identity (without synthesis or unity) of theory and practice by converting their decisional co-constitution into a unilateral duality whereby the subject performatively unilateralizes the dyadic synthesis of saying and doing. Thus, the non-philosophical subject unleashes the radically performative character of theory as well as the rigorously cognitive character of practice. Non-philosophy is at once a theoretical practice and a performative theory. Moreover, it is precisely in so far as the non-philosopher is *already* operating according to immanence as 'already-performed' that he or she cannot help but say what he/she does and do as he/she says.

## The reality and contingency of non-philosophy

Consequently, for Laruelle, non-philosophy is more than just a possibility. It is real – more radically real than any positivity or effectivity gauged philosophically in terms of empirical concretion or actuality. The question of its possibility is a philosophical one: it continues to assume the validity of the philosophical problematization of something that is no longer a problem for non-philosophy; something that is simply out of the question for it – radical immanence as the real root of decision and hence as the answer to every philosophical question. More specifically, radical immanence is the solution that precedes the possibility of decisional problematization.

Clearly, however, if radical immanence is the non-philosophical real, it is no longer the real as philosophically characterized in terms of perception, consciousness, materiality, production, power, the social, and so on. Nor is it the real as being, *différance*, *Ur-grund*, noumenon, thing-in-itself, will-to-power, self-relating negativity, *Unterschied*, non-identity, absolute deterritorialization. Instead, it is simply real immanence as utterly empty invariant=X. This is an invariant that does not resist philosophy but is indifferent to it, and hence can be rendered axiomatically determining for thought on the basis of any philosophical occasion. It is an invariant whose empty transparency does not render it refractory to cognition but on the contrary can be axiomatically specified using any philosophical material.

Thus, the specifically Laruellean discovery that makes non-philosophy effective is that the real is not a philosophical problem: it is positively nothing at all. And the fact that the real is no longer a problem for non-philosophy allows for a change in the way one thinks. Instead of proceeding philosophically from thought to the real, or using philosophy to think the real as difference, or as differing from some other philosophical term, one proceeds non-philosophically from the real's immanent identity to philosophy as specular transcendence which strives to split, distinguish or differentiate between the real and some other term, and then mirror the world through that difference. Instead of using the mirror of philosophy to think the transcendence of 'real' objects in the world, non-philosophy uses the immanence of the real to de-specularize those objects which philosophy cocoons in its reflexive transcendence. It follows that the object of non-philosophy is not the real, which is never an object, not even an unthinkable one, but the philosophical specularization of real objects.

Yet since non-philosophy only exists as immanent axiomatic determination of philosophy's resistance to immanent determination, does this de-specularization have any binding force for philosophy as such? Could something like a non-philosophical injunction to change how one thinks become imperative for philosophers?

Laruelle himself would be the first to admit that there is nothing necessary about non-philosophy. There is no obligation for the philosopher to switch from the philosophical to the non-philosophical posture. Unlike philosophical revolution, whose *raison d'être* stems from a vision of the true tasks of philosophy, Laruelle's axiomatic heresy cannot be philosophically legitimated by invoking an intolerable shortfall between what philosophy has been doing and what it should be doing. While the conceptual preoccupations which – after long and arduous detours – led Laruelle to his discovery have a venerable philosophical pedigree, they cannot be used to lend it an aura of necessity. Thus, from a philosophical perspective, the non-philosophical practice of philosophy is neither necessary nor inevitable. Unlike Heideggerian/Derridean deconstruction, which lays claims to an irrecusable 'historial' necessity for itself – the uncircumventable necessity of deconstructing the history of metaphysics – non-philosophy simply remains an aberrant possibility for the philosopher; one whose sole criterion of legitimation resides in an efficacy which can only be judged according to the parameters of the practice itself. Since that practice suspends the teleological considerations in terms of which the necessity of a move in the space of conceptual possibilities is usually appraised, Laruelle is obliged to deny that philosophers are under any kind of obligation to accept the pertinence of his discovery and begin practising philosophy non-philosophically.

Interestingly, the very considerations which render non-philosophy unproblematically real and immediately operational for the non-philosopher also ensure that it remains at a safe remove, safely ensconced in the realm of possibility for the philosopher. Yet the question remains: what is non-philosophy for? This is a philosophical question, but perhaps one non-philosophy cannot entirely obviate by simply referring the questioner to the efficiency of non-philosophical practice. Since the only philosophical legitimacy non-philosophy can muster is as an arbitrary possibility, and since its non-philosophical validity is out of the question – being a simple matter of efficiency – is it possible to frame the question of the worth of Laru-

elle's axiomatic heresy without reinscribing the latter within a philosophical teleology?

Laruelle himself invokes the desirability of 'enlarging the possibilities of thought' as one way of legitimating non-philosophy. And he also suggests that, despite appearances, philosophy's privileging of thought has always involved subordinating it to some extraneous end (ethical, political, aesthetic, and so on) while simultaneously reappropriating that end for thought, in conformity with the logic of decisional co-constitution. Thus, Laruelle seems to imply, thought has never been an end in itself for philosophy. Non-philosophy, by way of contrast, frees thought from every end. By curtailing philosophy's specular narcissism, non-philosophy untethers thought from every decisional telos.

Consequently, despite its apparent arbitrariness, Laruelle's axiomatic heresy can lay claim to a validity for philosophy: the validity of an emancipatory gesture as far as the form of thinking itself is concerned.<sup>12</sup> 'Emancipation', of course, is an eminently philosophical motif. But Laruelle invests it with a non-philosophical valence: philosophical specularity is constrictive because the possibilities of philosophical invention, whether formal or substantive, are already delimited in advance by philosophy's decisional syntax. But only from a non-philosophical vantage point does this constriction become perceptible. Philosophers themselves are entirely oblivious to it and more than happy to keep spinning variations on the decisional theme for centuries to come. If non-specular thinking does have a certain binding force for the philosopher willing to explore its possibility, it simply consists in the impossibility of returning to the circuitous ambit of decisional mirroring having once frequented the horizonless expanses of mirrorless immanence.

### The price of abstraction

Nevertheless, there will be many for whom the punitive abstraction of Laruelle's thought is too high a price to pay for such scanty rewards. Non-philosophy strikes its more generous detractors – that is, those who do not simply dismiss it out of hand as incomprehensible gobbledegook – as interesting but thoroughly inconsequential. Unlike Adorno, Heidegger or Derrida, Laruelle does not set out to dismantle metaphysics in a way that could be co-opted for the purposes of ideological critique. And, unlike Deleuze or Badiou, he does not elaborate a new philosophical system capable of incorporating a broad spectrum of contemporary artistic, scientific and social phenomena. But what is the worth of something that is neither critical nor

constructive? Has Laruelle not retreated from philosophy into something like a mathematized theology of radical immanence?

The answer to the latter question must, I believe, be an emphatic No. Unlike philosophers of immanence such as Spinoza and Deleuze, Laruelle does not decide in favour of immanence (which means *against* transcendence) through a philosophical decision which has an ethical telos as its ultimate horizon: liberation, the achievement of beatitude, the intellectual love of God. Although ethics is a philosophical material which can be treated non-philosophically, there can be no 'ethics of radical immanence' and consequently no ethics of non-philosophy.<sup>13</sup> The very notion of an 'ethics of immanence' is another instance of the way in which philosophical decision invariably subordinates immanence to a transcendent teleological horizon. But Laruelle is no more interested in subordinating radical immanence to philosophy than he is in subordinating philosophy to radical immanence. Radical immanence is simply not the object of non-philosophy. It is not even interesting: it is utterly banal, radically transparent. This is what separates Laruelle from Michel Henry, whose phenomenology of radical immanence entails an ultimately theological disavowal of philosophy. Yet the point, as Laruelle tirelessly repeats, is not to abandon philosophy in favour of a thought of immanence, but to use immanence to think philosophy. It is the consequences of thinking philosophy immanently that are interesting, not thinking immanence philosophically. Thus, unlike philosophies of absolute immanence such as those of Spinoza, Deleuze or Michel Henry, non-philosophy has nothing to say about radical immanence 'in itself'. What it does have something to say about is how immanence provides a new basis for practising philosophy.

Conversely, and in spite of the fact that Laruelle has certainly been guilty of encouraging such misinterpretations in the past,<sup>14</sup> it would be a mistake to see in non-philosophy nothing more than an attempt to extend the Kantian critique of metaphysics to the whole of philosophy. Unlike Kantian critique, the non-philosophical suspension of decision is not guided by a normative, ethico-juridical telos. Nor can it be reduced to some sort of post-Derridean variant on deconstruction. Unlike deconstruction, the unilateralization of decision involves a positive enlargement of the ambit of decision, rather than just an aporetic interruption.

Thus, before hastily dismissing Laruelle's work as a crypto-theological renunciation of philosophy, a hyper-deconstruction, or even a sterile exercise in meta-philo-

sophical narcissism, it is important to remember that although non-philosophy does not have a goal, it does have a *function*. And although it cannot be legitimated in terms of some transcendent teleological horizon, non-philosophical practice is *for* something: it is for philosophical decision. Anyone interested in practising philosophy should be interested in Laruelle's incisive exposure of what he calls the 'theoreticist idealism' inherent in the spontaneous philosophical practice of philosophical decision. Philosophers, Laruelle insists, do not know what they are doing. They are never doing what they say or saying what they are doing – even and especially when they purport to be able to legitimate their philosophical decisions in terms of some ethical, political or juridical end. The theoreticist idealism inherent in decision is never so subtle and pernicious as when it invokes the putative materiality of some extra-philosophical instance in order to demonstrate its 'pragmatic worth'. To condemn Laruelle for excessive abstraction on the grounds that the worth of a philosophy can only be gauged in terms of its concrete, extra-philosophical (e.g. ethical, political or juridical) effects is to ignore the way in which extra-philosophical concretion invariably involves an idealized abstraction that has already been circumscribed by decision.

It may be that Laruelle's crisp, sharply delineated mode of abstraction turns out to be far more concrete than those nebulous abstractions which philosophers try to pass off as instances of concretion. In other words, the criteria for evaluating the worth of non-philosophy's function for philosophy are not available to philosophers, who know not what they do. In non-philosophy, radical axiomatic abstraction gives rise, not to a system or doctrine inviting assent or dissent, but to an immanent methodology whose function for philosophy no one is in a position to evaluate as yet. Ultimately, then, non-philosophy can only be gauged in terms of what it can do. And no one yet knows what non-philosophy can or cannot do.

## Bibliography of works by Laruelle

Laruelle divides his work into three periods: Philosophy I, Philosophy II and Philosophy III. Philosophy I (1971–81) could be called Laruelle's formative period, his philosophical apprenticeship. The shift toward non-philosophy is initiated with Philosophy II (1981–95). However, as far as Laruelle himself is concerned, it is not until Philosophy III (1995–present) that non-philosophy truly begins.

### Philosophie I

*Phénomène et différence. Essai sur l'ontologie de Ravaillon* [*Phenomenon and Difference: An Essay on Ravaillon's Ontology*], Klincksieck, Paris, 1971.

*Machines textuelles. Déconstruction et libido d'écriture* [*Textual Machines: Deconstruction and Libido of Writing*],

Seuil, Paris, 1976.

*Nietzsche contre Heidegger. Thèses pour une politique nietzschéenne* [*Nietzsche contra Heidegger: Theses for a Nietzschean Politics*], Payot, Paris, 1977.

*Le déclin de l'écriture* [*The Decline of Writing*], Aubier-Flammarion, Paris, 1977.

*Au delà du principe de pouvoir* [*Beyond the Power Principle*], Payot, Paris, 1978.

### Philosophie II

*Le Principe de minorité* [*The Minority Principle*], Aubier, Paris, 1981.

*Une biographie de l'homme ordinaire. Des autorités et des minorités* [*A Biography of the Ordinary Man: Of Authorities and Minorities*], Aubier, Paris, 1985.

*Les Philosophies de la différence. Introduction critique* [*The Philosophies of Difference: A Critical Introduction*], PUF, Paris, 1986.

*Philosophie et non-philosophie* [*Philosophy and Non-Philosophy*], Mardaga, Liège/Brussels, 1989.

*En tant qu'un. La non-philosophie expliquée au philosophes* [*As One: Non-Philosophy Explained to Philosophers*], Aubier, Paris, 1991.

*Théorie des Identités. Fractalité généralisée et philosophie artificielle* [*Theory of Identities: Generalized Fractality and Artificial Philosophy*], PUF, Paris, 1992.

### Philosophie III

*Théorie des Étrangers. Science des hommes, démocratie, non-psychanalyse* [*Theory of Strangers: Science of Men, Democracy, Non-Psychoanalysis*], Kimé, Paris, 1995.

*Principes de la non-philosophie* [*The Principles of Non-Philosophy*], PUF, Paris, 1996.

*Dictionnaire de la non-philosophie* [*Dictionary of Non-Philosophy*], François Laruelle et Collaborateurs, Kimé, Paris, 1998.

*Éthique de l'Étranger. Du crime contre l'humanité* [*Ethics of the Stranger: Of the Crime Against Humanity*], Kimé, Paris, 2000.

*Introduction au non-marxisme* [*Introduction to Non-Marxism*], PUF, Paris, 2000.

*Le Christ futur. Une leçon d'hérésie* [*The Future Christ: A Lesson in Heresy*], Exils, Paris, 2002.

## Notes

1. Born in 1937, Laruelle is Professor of Philosophy at the University of Paris X–Nanterre, where he has taught since 1967.
2. For instance: Althusser, Badiou, Derrida, Deleuze, Foucault, Lacan, Lyotard, Serres.
3. *Au-delà du principe de pouvoir*, Payot, Paris, 1978, p. 7.
4. The radically heterodox character of Laruelle's thought, its sheer unclassifiable *strangeness*, has consistently managed to provoke hostility and bewilderment not only among the guardians of philosophical orthodoxy within the French academy but also among his relatively unorthodox philosophical peers. The unfortunate result, after a certain degree of intellectual notoriety among the Parisian avant-garde of the 1970s, has been a position of almost total intellectual isolation. Laruelle continues to inspire a peculiar mixture of derision and fear among his fellow philosophers. Derision, because his work is deemed utterly 'incomprehensible'. Fear, because those same philosophers, who are used to baffling the uninitiated, find their own inability to understand Laruelle



unsettling. Yet, contrary to what these philosophers maintain, there is nothing obscurantist or wilfully esoteric about Laruelle's work. Understanding it is not a matter of initiation: it does not entail exhaustive familiarity with a corpus of sacred texts replete with all manner of lexical trickery or obscure wordplay. The difficulty presented by Laruelle's work is entirely objective: it is a matter of learning to think in a way that is radically unlike the way one has been trained to think if one is a philosopher. And having learnt to think non-philosophically, the point is to put this technique into practice to see what it is capable of producing. Laruelle's work presents the reader with an organon, an instrument which one needs to learn how to use so as to be in a position to gauge its potential, not a system or world-view whose doctrines invite assent or dissent.

5. For example Heidegger, Derrida, Deleuze. Laruelle analyses this problematic in *Les philosophies de la différence*, PUF, Paris, 1986.
6. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, trans. G. Burchell and H. Tomlinson, Verso, London, 1994.
7. Michel Henry, *The Essence of Manifestation*, trans. G. Etskorn, Martinus Nijhoff, The Hague, 1973.
8. Laruelle sketches a non-philosophical treatment of the issue of 'thinking machines' in two recent but as yet unpublished papers: 'Théorie unifié de la pensée et du calcul' ['Unified Theory of Thought and Computation'] and 'Performance et Performé' ['Performance and Performed']. I should mention here that Laruelle himself would probably not endorse what he would see as my excessively 'machinic' characterization of the non-philosophical subject.
9. This decisional structure is at work in Deleuze and Guattari's machinic constructivism: the philosophical concept's counter-effectuation of intensive materiality is at once extracted from an empirical state of affairs through which the philosopher is forced to think and transcendently productive of being qua event. But perhaps it is best exemplified by Heidegger, who re-inscribes the conditions for the genesis of the project of fundamental ontology within the structure of fundamental ontology itself. Thus, the philosophical project delineated in *Being and Time* encompasses its own conditions of possibility, as explicated in *Dasein's* shift from dispersion in average everydayness to the properly meta-physical appropriation of being-unto-death as its ownmost potentiality for being. Since it is via the latter that *Dasein's* own being comes into question for it, fundamental ontology as theoretical project is ultimately supervenient on the existential ur-project delineated in being-unto-death.
10. 'Once [philosophy] begins to be used as a material and occasion, it becomes shorn of its traditional finalities, all of which are based upon a "spontaneous philosophical faith". The latter forms a circle: it obliges one to practise philosophy for reasons that are extrinsic to it, whether these be ethical, juridical, scientific, aesthetic, etc. But philosophy then uses these finalities the better to triumph and affirm itself on the basis of their subordination as the only activity which is genuinely excellent, uncircumventable or "absolute". All this prescriptive activity – whether it be ethical or pedagogical, etc. –, all this normative or auto-normative use of philosophy "with a view to experience"; every latent or explicit teleology concomitant with the spontaneous practice of philosophy must be abandoned, which does not mean destroyed but treated as a mere material and practised henceforth within these limits' (Laruelle, *Philosophie et non-philosophie*, Mardaga, Liège, 1989, p. 27).
11. 'It is this Performed, shorn of the fetishes of performativity and of activity and the causa sui in general, which invests thinking itself as identity (within its relatively autonomous order of thought) of science and philosophy, and more generally, of the theoretical and the pragmatic. We shall not say too hastily – confusing once again thinking with the Real – that this identity is performed directly in-One, but that it is performed only in the last instance by the One as the Performed itself' (Laruelle, *Principes de la non-philosophie*, PUF, Paris, 1996, p. 215).
12. A point made by Hughes Choplin in his admirable little monograph *La non-philosophie de François Laruelle* (Kimé, Paris 2000).
13. See, for example, Laruelle's *Éthique de l'Étranger* (Kimé, Paris, 1999) for precisely such a treatment.
14. Especially in certain works from *Philosophie II* such as *Philosophie et non-philosophie*, and *En tant qu'un* (Aubier, Paris, 1991).

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